

A photograph of a landscape. In the foreground, there are tall, dry grasses. In the middle ground, there is a church with a red roof and a small steeple. To the left of the church, there are some trees and a building. The background is a clear blue sky. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

Light

...
on a New World

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Books of the Bible

Malachi

FOR ANY BELIEVER who ever doubts whether God is truly listening to His people, Malachi is the book to read. God tells us in His Word that He hears what we say, [*Matthew 12.36*] and even what we don't say out loud: the thoughts and intents of the heart. [*Hebrews 4.12*] In Malachi's short prophecy we find the reality of God's listening ear thoroughly demonstrated.

There are two sides, however, to God knowing everything we say and think. It's encouraging to be aware of it when we are faithful and when we want God's help, but it is not something we choose to dwell on when we are wayward and have a bad attitude.

Most of the inhabitants of Israel in the fifth century BC fell into the second category. God did not like what he heard and sent Malachi to confront them about it. There were a few whose words and thoughts were acceptable [*Chapter 3.16,17*] but most of them had developed a grumbling, ungrateful attitude towards God which made their worship ineffectual and their lives more cursed than blessed.

The time of the prophecy is reckoned to be the latter half of the fifth century BC. The Jews had returned from captivity in Babylon, had rebuilt the Lord's temple at Jerusalem, and now they were trying to get on with their lives. But things did not go well for them and as a result, Israel, God's chosen people, blamed God's neglect of **them** for their difficulties, when all the time it was their neglect of **Him** that was the real problem.

THE MESSENGER

Malachi is more of a title than a name. It is most likely a shortened form of Malachiah (a combination of two Hebrew words, Malak and Jah), which means Messenger of God. But there is more to it than that, because *malak* is also the

Hebrew word for angel. There is the possibility that this final book of the Old Testament was delivered through an angel. This would be fitting, because the final book of the New Testament was '*sent and signified...by his (Christ's) angel*' [Revelation 1.1] - perhaps the same angel. The only objections to this are where the writer asks that God '*will be gracious unto us...*' [chapter 1.9] and where the writer spoke as one of the people and said, '*why do we deal treacherously...*' [chapter 2.10] These verses make sense if Malachi spoke as a fellow Israelite (though not personally involved in the treachery), but do not make sense coming from an angel.

That said, the title '*Messenger of God*' would still be very appropriate to the book, because a significant passage in the book is about two great messengers of God. Chapter three begins, '*Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.*' [Malachi 3.1] There can be no doubt that this is a prophecy of the coming of John the Baptist, the messenger who would prepare the people for Jesus, [Luke 1.17] and Jesus himself, the messenger of the covenant. So the final book of the Old Testament looks prophetically across the four hundred year gap between the Old and New Testaments to the momentous events that lay on the far side of that gap.

But Malachi himself was also a messenger trying to prepare the people of Israel for their Messiah. As the last prophet before John, his was the task of setting the people on the right path through the long period of '*no open vision*' [1 Samuel 3.1] that lay ahead. God, through Malachi, wanted to give His people the best opportunity of staying spiritually on course. They had the Scriptures containing their history, the Law, the wisdom and the prophetic literature - all they needed was the right attitude to it all! Without that vital ingredient the Scriptures would do them no good. If they could only get their attitude right they would steer successfully through the time of God's '*silence.*' The same is true for every believer today. So let us follow with *personal* interest what Malachi had to tell Israel about what they were saying and thinking.

QUESTIONS AND...

'I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us?' [Malachi 1.2] God through Malachi answered a number of questions like this one. The inference is that the prophet Malachi had been moving among the people of Israel, listening to the words and thoughts of the people and making the statements that produced these answers. Malachi had affirmed that God loved them and they said, in effect, '*Where's the evidence for it? Look at the*



A view of the wall of Jerusalem

state we're in.' Malachi had told the priests that they were despising God in the way they carried out their duties and they said defensively, 'How have we despised God?' [chapter 1]

They couldn't see it. Malachi had told the people that God no longer had any regard for their offerings in His temple and took no pleasure in them, and they responded, 'Why? What's wrong with our offerings?' They didn't believe there was a problem. Malachi told them that they wearied God with the things they said, and they answered, 'How have we wearied Him? Whatever can you mean?' [Chapter 2]

Malachi then reminded them that if they returned to the things of God, He would return to them, but they were bewildered and said, 'How can we return? We haven't left God. Look, we're doing all the things we're supposed to be doing.' Then Malachi told them that they had robbed God, and they said, 'How can we possibly have done that?' [chapter 3]

...ANSWERS

Israel had lost their way. They were going through the motions of serving God but their heart wasn't in it. They were acknowledging God's requirements only insofar as it suited themselves and not at all as it pleased God. Yet they

complained that they were not blessed! They could not understand why God didn't treat them better than He did! So Malachi came with the answers from God.

In response to their complaint that God didn't love them, Malachi told them to look at their history. Specifically he singled out the vastly differing histories of Jacob and Esau (Edom) [chapter 1.2-4], the twin brothers with different destinies. [Genesis 25.21-26] Edom's lands were destined to be desolate, however much his descendants might boast that they would return and rebuild their cities. But God would and *did* bless Israel in their return to rebuild their cities. Only their own lack of appreciation for it was holding back the more abundant blessing of God. God loved them and wanted to show it, but they were preventing Him from reaching them by their ignorance and their ungrateful attitude. The door to the heart opens only from the inside.

As for the priests carrying out their duties in a God-dishonouring manner, Malachi had simply to point to the poor condition of the offerings they were making on the Lord's altar. The Law said that animals for sacrifice had to be without blemish, the pick of the herd or flock [Leviticus 22.17-25], but they were offering the cast-offs! As God through the prophet said to them, try offering such animals to the governor of the land and see what he thinks of them. If they wouldn't dare insult a high official, then what did that say about their regard for God? [chapter 1.7-9] The truth was that they found their priestly duties tiresome and had no real interest in doing them properly. [chapter 1.13] And they wondered why God did not bless them!

Malachi's next point was about the priests wearying God. Because God did not intervene immediately and deal with certain unlawful practices among the people, they concluded and taught that God condoned them. [chapter 2.17] How common that belief is! They mistook His love and forbearance for approval. The chief problem was two kinds of adultery: one spiritual, the other literal. They were lusting after other gods, degrading themselves with idolatry, and they were lusting after women and causing the miseries of divorce. Both were the breaking of vows: the first to their God, the second to their wives. [chapter 2.11-17] God approves of neither, and the priests were sorely trying the patience of God by claiming otherwise.

DELIGHTING IN THEIR MESSIAH?

In view of what has been said, there would seem to be no little irony in the opening verses of chapter three. Here are those references to the coming of John the Baptist and Christ we mentioned earlier. Christ is described as '*the Lord*,

whom ye seek.' and 'the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in.' [verse 1] In practice they were neither seeking their Messiah, nor delighting in him. The prophet was moved to warn them that if they continued in this fashion they would not 'abide the day of his coming.' [verse. 2] And, true enough, their successors, the priests, Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees of the first century did not fare well in the presence of their Messiah when he came. Though Malachi's words also have more far-reaching implications for all those who continue to weary God when the Son returns a second time to set up God's Kingdom. [chapter 3.2-5] Astonishingly, when Malachi said they should return to God, they looked blankly at him and said, 'In what way shall we return?' [chapter 3.7 NKJV] They honestly didn't know what they were doing wrong. These were the religious leaders of the people. Small wonder God was weary with His people!

SUFFERING FROM LACK - YOU'RE NOT GIVING ENOUGH!

Their lack of understanding had brought about their national and personal problems. This was why they were finding life hard. Food was short, money was short, family life was complicated by divorce and adultery, and with such stresses no doubt the general health of the people suffered, too. Why didn't their God give them what they needed? Because *they* were robbing God. [chapter 3.8] Logically, you'd think they would have all they wanted if they were robbing God! But it doesn't work like that. When you hold back on what you should be giving God, or if you give it in a begrudging way, then God will see to it that you don't prosper. (Though be very careful not to assume that the less well off are all robbing God. Things are not always that straightforward.)

Giving is a test of faith. Under the Law of Moses, Israel were asked to give a tenth of the increase of their flocks and harvests to the priests for God. And they were to give the best of what they had. But, as we've already seen, they were giving their *rejects* to the priests. And they were giving far less than the appointed tithe. Why would they do this? Well, firstly, because they didn't think it mattered greatly. But they also held back because they didn't have much themselves. They didn't have faith enough in God to believe that if they gave willingly and generously, even though they didn't have much, that He would respond with plenty. God told them to bring Him what He was due - have faith! - and He would pour out such blessings on them that they would not have room to store it all, [chapter 3.8-12] '**for God loveth a cheerful giver.**' [2 Corinthians 9.7] God will always bless a faithful attitude.

TALKERS AND THINKERS REMEMBERED

They had seen no point in worshipping God because they were becoming

worse off while they did so, not realizing that the careless manner of their worship - their spiritual poverty - was the cause of their continuing slide towards actual poverty. But there were a few who were faithful. Whether these few had remained faithful over the years against the trend of the declining standard of their people, or whether they had responded to the words of Malachi, is not known. What we do know is that God listened to them with greater pleasure than He listened to the unfaithful: *'Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.'* [chapter 3.16] God made a point of remembering these people, as He makes a point of remembering all such people. Today is no different in this respect.

God has a purpose with the sort of people who speak often to one another about Him and who think upon Him in truth - those who show a faithful attitude. *'They shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.'* [chapter 3.17] There is to be a 'day' of judgement and a final separation of the righteous and wicked. That 'day', said Malachi, *'shall burn as an oven.'* It will see the wicked consumed and the righteous at peace on the earth. [chapter 4.1-3] In part, these warnings were directed to the Jewish people because of the troubles that were to come upon them in the wake of the crucifixion of Christ. In AD 70, the Romans besieged Jerusalem and scattered the inhabitants of Israel world-wide. Christ himself gave similar prophetic warnings [Matthew 24, Luke 21]. But both Christ and Malachi also looked further ahead to *'a time of trouble, such as never was'* [Daniel 12.1], which will embroil the whole world. But the faithful should not worry. God hears them and remembers them. In fact He is going to bring about this time of trouble *for* them. He will use it to rid the world of all the things that He and the faithful hate and to introduce a time of unprecedented blessings. Imagine the abundance in a world where an attitude of faith is the norm! - a world from which all the faithless, miserly, complainers and law-breakers have been removed!

'SALVATION IS OF THE JEWS'

But God would rather find no-one faithless, certainly not any of His own chosen people. That's why He continued to send them prophets down through the centuries, messengers to warn His people. The final verses of Malachi's prophecy are about the sending of Elijah the prophet *'before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD'*, to turn the hearts of the people. Four hundred years later John the Baptist came *'in the spirit and power of Elias'* (Elijah) [Luke 1.17], to prepare the hearts of the people for Christ, that as many

as possible might believe and escape the terrible events of AD 70. However, another Elijah figure, perhaps even the great prophet himself, is due to come before or during the earth-shaking events that precede the kingdom of God. His mission will be, like that of John the Baptist, to convince the **Jews** that Jesus is their Messiah. For the Jews remain God's chosen people and the blessing of all the nations is bound up in **their** ultimate blessing [Genesis 12.2,3] for Jesus said 'salvation is of the Jews.' [John 4.22] When God blesses them fully and finally, the whole world will rejoice with them. All those who have shown an attitude of faith, that is.

Nobody will then say, 'Wherein hast thou loved us?' It will be only too apparent!

Colin Attridge
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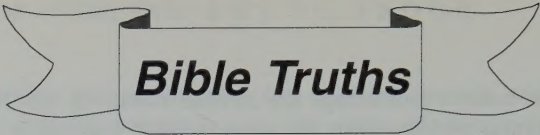
COVER PICTURE

WINTER IS HERE again in England and although it is noticeably colder at this time of the year, we do not seem to experience the heavy snowfalls of years gone by. Our cover picture shows a typical winter scene in rural England. The frost gives a magical new look to the trees which have lost their leaves and everything is covered in white.

In the book of Job, the words of Elihu remind us that our changing weather patterns are ordained by God: '*Out of the south cometh the whirlwind: and cold out of the north. By the breath of God frost is given...stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God.*' [Job 37.9,10,14] To this we can add the words of the Psalmist: '*O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.*' [Psalm 104.24]

We have a choice then in the way we view the world around us. We can act on the advice of Elihu and marvel at God's wondrous works in the natural world, or we can be taken in by man-made theories which lead us to deny the very existence of God. If we are wise, we will join the Psalmist in acknowledging the greatness of our Creator: '*O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!*' [Psalm 8.1]

EDITOR



Bible Truths

Letters from Lachish

ABOUT FORTY KILOMETRES to the south west of Jerusalem is the hill of Tell-ed-Duweir. This is the site of the Biblical city of Lachish, which was taken by Joshua in the conquest of Canaan. [Joshua 10.32]

King Rehoboam (930-913 BC) son of Solomon, rebuilt Lachish as one of a chain of cities to defend Judah. [2 Chronicles 11.5-9] Later in the time of king Hezekiah (715-686 BC), Sennacherib king of Assyria had come against these fortified cities and captured them including Lachish! [2 Kings 18.13,14] There are carved stone reliefs on display in the British Museum, taken from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh portraying the siege and fall of Lachish.

The city features later in the Biblical record, in the reign of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah [597-587 BC] *'Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke...when the king of Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and Azekah; for only these fortified cities remained of the cities of Judah.'* [Jeremiah 34.6,7 NKJV]

The amazing thing is that, when the archaeologists were digging at the Tell of Lachish, they found letters written by a soldier, Hoshayahu, who was in charge of an outpost not far from Lachish. The letters, written on clay tiles, (ostrakon) were addressed to Yaush, the commanding officer of Lachish and they convey the concerns of this man, that while he was watching for and observing signals from Lachish, he could no longer see signals from Azekah.

So here is another remarkable piece of evidence preserved for nearly 2,500 years, to be unearthed by the archaeologist's spade in recent times, verifying the truth of Jeremiah's record of the invasion and the impending destruction of the ancient kingdom of Judah. As the prophet Habakkuk wrote, *'...the stone will cry out from the wall.'* [Habakkuk 2.11 NKJV]

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Trusting in God

UNIVERSAL RELIANCE ON TRUST

HAVE YOU EVER thought what it would be like to live before the age of modern science and medicine? How do you think the people of past ages dealt with all the uncertainties and uncontrollable things in their lives?

Today, we rely so heavily on the wonders of science and technology that we seem far removed from the past. However, consider the number of people that you know who have had an illness that would have been fatal if not for modern medicine. This makes us stop and think. We realize there are still many uncertainties that we have to deal with and so in this sense we are linked to past ages.

As we study the Bible, we discover some key ideas and principles about living that men and women in ancient times found to be true in their lives. One of these key ideas is the Bible's clear message that **we can trust in God. What does it mean to trust in God and what value is there in having this trust?**

If we stop and consider whether there is a need to trust, we find very quickly that our world is filled with this seemingly insignificant word. We find it inter-woven into all our activities. For instance, when we observe parents with their small children, we see these little ones having complete trust that their parents will meet their needs. The children need the support of their parents. What a devastation to a child if this support is not there! As another example, adults trust that the acquisition of skills and training will enable them to find work and provide for the necessities of this life. What a shock to the individual to find that his skills are no longer required, that they have become redundant or that a company has to close its doors and lay off staff. Trust plays an important role in our lives: many other examples could be cited, the central one being the state of our very own health and well-being.

ANXIETY AND WORRY

Anxiety and worry are the fastest growing ailments of our times. We worry and are anxious about what the future holds in terms of our well-being and safety for ourselves and our loved ones. We come to realize that it is a fact of life that nothing is really guaranteed. Interestingly enough, this problem has always faced mankind. That is why it is not surprising to find these elements of life to exist in the lives of all people, whether they live today, 50 years ago or 5,000 years ago.

A BASIC BIBLE THEME

Perhaps now you sense why we are very excited about this idea of **trust in God**. The message of the Bible is to tell us about a very close relationship between God and man. In the Bible, the word trust occurs 134 times and the concept of trust in God is the underlying theme of most recorded events in the Bible. As we have mentioned, in the example of parent and child, we see a special relationship between the provider and the recipient. It is a bond cemented by powerful emotions that express the absolute dependence of the child on the parent and the absolute necessity of the parent to provide.

The Bible message is very clear that our world has a great Creator. In fact, in the famous Lord's prayer, He is referred to as '*Our Father*.' [Matthew 6.9] Also, He is '*not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being*.' [Acts 17.27,28] Is it possible to have a relationship with Him that is as strong as that of parent and child? Is He really this close? The answer is **YES**. How then does this relationship work?

Consider these verses from a well-known Psalm:

'The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.' [Psalm 23.1-3]

Isn't there a profound philosophy of life being stated here? Who is leading whom? Isn't the relationship being expressed here one of profound trust? We can just imagine the peace and tranquility of mind of this writer who lived about 3,000 years ago. This man David (the Psalmist) saw himself as a sheep under the care and protection of God who provided for all his needs and protected him in times of trouble. David, by the way, was one of the great

rulers of Israel, who through God's power, brought the nation of Israel to the zenith of its power and glory. In spite of all this, he attributed his success to the great Creator of heaven and earth. It was God that led and guided him through his life. God was the shepherd and David but a sheep. This is the God that we have learned about by studying the Bible and we want to tell you about Him too.

PRAYER

How do we build this relationship with God? How do we begin to come under His care and protection? The answer is PRAYER. The Apostle James tells us to '*Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.*' [James 4.8] The Apostle Paul emphasises this teaching: '*Pray without ceasing.*' [1 Thessalonians 5.17] As already mentioned, God is very near to us for in Him we live and move and have our being. But why should we pray to God? Again, the Bible is filled with recorded incidents of men and women who turned to God to help them in their hour of need. There were many things in their lives that they could not control. They needed care and protection. So they turned to God in prayer to help them deal with those parts of their lives that were out of their control.

Now there are numerous examples in the Bible that illustrate the response of God to meet the needs of individuals who were experiencing anxiety and worry. It is a biblical theme designed to teach the interconnection that exists between God and man. The many examples address the core issues of the cycle of human life: birth, growth to physical maturity, then growth to spiritual maturity and finally death. From beginning to end, the powerful emotions of anxiety, worry or loss are experienced in ourselves and our loved ones as we watch each other face the key issues of life. We can all identify with them.

We will select one recorded situation that involves human anxiety dealing with birth. In the Old Testament there was a young woman named Hannah. She was married to a man named Elkanah who had two wives. The name of the other wife was Peninnah. Now Hannah's dilemma was that she could not have children while Peninnah could. Unfortunately, Peninnah made it her business to make Hannah feel inferior because she was childless. This distressed Hannah greatly, especially as time passed with no change in her situation. In fact if you have time to look up this recorded incident in 1 Samuel chapter 1, the Bible states that God had '*shut up her womb*' (ie not allowed her to have children).

When the anguish became so great, Hannah exercised the only option she knew and that was to pray to God. She was making a special prayer at the temple in Shiloh when the priest, a man named Eli, saw her speaking to herself and initially thought she was drunk. He didn't realize that she was praying.

When she explained what she was doing, he understood her sorrowfulness and told her to leave in peace as he would ask God on her behalf to grant her the request she was making of God. This she did and in the course of time she became pregnant and had a son who she named Samuel. This child was to become a famous spiritual leader in Israel when he grew up.

There are many lessons for us in this account but the one that we particularly note is the answering of prayer. One of the needs of human existence is the perpetuation of human life. This has and always will be a central issue of human activity giving meaning and purpose to life. With life comes uncertainty as to how the future will unfold. Every human being faces this dilemma. You can probably see that there is a clear pattern here. God has designed life in such a way as to have uncertainty, so that we will realize our dependence upon Him.

IS PRAYER RELEVANT TODAY?

Does prayer work today in this modern age? The answer is **YES**. Is there a need for prayer today? Well, nothing has really changed in our world even though we have very sophisticated technology at our disposal. Uncertainties and uncontrollable events still are a part of our modern lives. So it seems very clear that prayer and trust in God have as big a role to play in our lives today as they did with those Bible characters whose lives are recorded for our benefit.

The question that many people will ask is - are prayers answered? It is exciting for us as believers to know that He will answer our prayers. We have listed one Bible example already in the case of Hannah. There are many other examples too covering many different situations. How can anyone escape the uncertainties of how life will unfold? We can all identify with this as it is a feature of our existence, a design feature placed there by the great Creator in order to cause us to turn to Him and to believe in Him.

It has been proven time and again by those who put this trust in God. These are real events happening to real people. The element that baffles those who doubt, is that prayers are answered very naturally; it doesn't appear extraordinary. To us who pray when we need help and find events coming together to address our specific problem, we are completely convinced because of the very personal and specific nature of the help we receive. It is the timing that also makes it more than coincidence. A personal need is matched with a specific outcome in the situations we experience in life. The repetition of such occurrences confirms the reality. It gives believers a great assurance and a sense

of peace and inner confidence after witnessing such occurrences in our life. It is really very simple and very easy to experience the effect of God in our lives.

RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMITMENT

Is all this care and protection from God just for our own benefit? Do we accept all this support and not feel some sense of obligation and responsibility? As believers, we see our lives being guided just like David who saw God as his shepherd. Prayers are answered in such a way that we are being shown by God what He expects from us.

Consider some more words of the Psalmist: *'Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb. Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.'* [Psalm 37.1-5]

As we read such passages, it is very clear that God is teaching us to be righteous, to turn aside from sin and evil and to learn to be like Him. We observe the reference to *'Commit thy way unto the LORD.'* To encourage us, He gives us the things we need but in return He wants us to transform our lives. Consider the words of the Apostle Paul to the believers in Rome:

'And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.'

[Romans 12.2]

As we observe very carefully how God answers our prayers, we see the corrective component as well. After all, no one is perfect. Again, the skilful manner in which our weaknesses are exposed by events and circumstances reinforces the knowledge that God is working with us to produce a better person. It is beyond coincidence that we are being shaped and fashioned by the Creator's hand that is looking after our ultimate well-being. If we allow this process to take place, if we allow God to shape us, we become a truly beautiful product of God's creation! This is what is meant by spiritual maturity.

SPIRITUAL MATURITY

What the Bible message is clearly saying to us is that God our Creator wants

us to trust in Him. We initiate this relationship by prayer and He responds, but we must be sincere and genuine. He will take care of our worries and anxieties if we put our trust in Him and allow Him to lead us. As we have mentioned earlier, He has designed our world this way. This is a law of the universe. It is certain and reliable. It is like a hidden secret waiting to be discovered. The uncertainty in our lives is obvious as we look into the future, whether it be later today, next week or next month. It is how God has created this world to cause us to realize our dependence and need of Him. The Lord Jesus is very definite about this relationship: *'Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they.'* [Matthew 6.26 NIV] Jesus concludes his teaching in this chapter with the assurance: *'...do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself...'* [Matthew 6.34] This is the life philosophy that God and His son Jesus wants us to have. **Put our trust in God and He will provide.**

This is the message that is consistently portrayed throughout the Bible. In the example of Hannah, we see her spiritual connection to God strengthened by her experience. Can we not all identify with these similar needs today? The answer is **yes** and it is within our power to act and receive.

CONCLUSION

Think what our lives would be like without anxious worry and hopeless distress. It would be an adventure, a joy, and a great comfort to experience this love of God. God is inviting us to be led and provided for by Him, to be shaped and transformed by Him so that we become an expression of God's creative hand. Sometimes we receive correction and sometimes reward as God takes us to spiritual maturity. The Bible shows us how men and women of old trusted in God and this links their life experiences to ours. Out of worry and distress we can come to God, if we want to choose to access His help. There is purpose in the uncertainties of life and this design purpose is to give us the choice - the choice to trust in God and to be led by Him. It is really that close to each and everyone of us.

The Bible invites you to build your life around God. There is much to learn about God if we are prepared to read and listen to God's word. Let the experience of answered prayers inspire you and God will help you realize your true potential.

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The Reality of Christ's Resurrection

WHICH BELIEFS ARE fundamental to the Christian Faith ? Put that question to the average person and you would probably get a variety of answers. However among those answers you may find the following: 'There is an all powerful God', or 'There was a man called Jesus Christ who lived sometime back in history'. You may also be told that 'this man was the son of God' and 'That he was killed by being crucified at the hands of the Romans'; even 'that he came back to life after three days'. Some may finish the whole thing off by telling us 'that he went up into heaven to be with God' and that, 'when we die, if we have been good in our lives we will go to heaven to be with him.'

To establish the absolute truth of the fundamentals of true Christian belief, the only place we can turn, is to our Bibles; for it is here that the facts have been placed on record by the all powerful God, the creator of all things. Few people however will actually follow this track but it is **the only** one which can lead to the correct answers. *'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.'* [2 Timothy 3:16] So wrote the Apostle Paul to Timothy, under Divine inspiration.

MODERN DAY THINKING

Given this endorsement from God himself, it is surprising that religious leaders, throughout the ages and even today seem to be unable or unwilling to follow the Creator's advice. The most fundamental part of Christian belief is the resurrection (the bringing back to life) of the dead Jesus Christ. Within the scriptural account and the teaching of it by Christ's apostles, lies the only hope of mankind's ultimate survival and salvation. However there are church leaders today that openly cast doubt on this essential fact, teaching the philosophies of man rather than the Word of God. In an English newspaper, 'The Sunday Telegraph' for April 12 1998, there was an article by a Church leader that referred to the physical resurrection of Christ in the following way: *'The word*

physical is an odd word. It's quite clear something took place that was not just hallucinations of a few people. But if we wanted to make a film of it, we have not got the data.'

THINKING OF A BY-GONE AGE

Perhaps the promoter of those thoughts was under the impression that the idea he was promoting was a new one, but let us turn to the Scriptures to learn a valuable lesson:

'Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.' [1 Corinthians 15 :12-23]

The Apostle Paul was obviously aware of similar teaching to that propounded in the modern newspaper, creeping into the infant church even in his day. We can see in his argument against such anti-resurrection philosophy just how pivotal to the true Christian faith the reality of a physical resurrection was and indeed still is today. Christ's resurrection was necessary as he was the forerunner of all those that would believe in him and die in faith. They died in the certain hope of being raised back to life in the day of Judgement. Those last few words of the quotation from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, show also the reality of Christ's second coming (his return) to the earth and demolish the philosophy that the righteous go to heaven at death, - otherwise why would Christ bother to return to the earth ?

So the words of the preacher recorded in Ecclesiastes are true if we apply them to this modern erroneous thinking: *'The thing that hath been, it is that which*

shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.' [Ecclesiastes 1.9,10].

CENTRAL TEACHING OF THE GOSPEL

But should we pin the whole argument on just one passage of Scripture and ignore other instances? Definitely not! The physical resurrection of Christ and ultimately his followers, runs through the gospel records and the epistles as a continuous thread.

The Apostle Peter spoke to a crowd of people on the subject:

‘Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption.’ [Acts 2:29-31]

Those last few words concerning the non-corruption of his flesh, demonstrates that it was a **physical** resurrection of the body of Christ and not a spiritual apparition that the disciples saw after Christ had been raised to life by God.

It is also made clear by Paul in his epistle to the Romans, that the believers in Christ would be (in the mercy of God) subject to the same divine blessing of resurrection from death:

‘Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.’ [Romans 6.3-5]

Again the closing words of that quotation encapsulate the reality of the **physical** resurrection for the believer. As Jesus was physically raised back to life so too will his believers.

This is the hope of **true** Christians today. This was the hope of the first century Christians:

‘Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.’ [1 Peter 1.2,3]

Again the scripture is very specific in the wording. The hope is not a vain hope but a lively or living hope, one that can be grasped with the full knowledge that it will be met and fulfilled.

CHRIST’S PLAIN STATEMENT

The religious leaders of the Jews approached the Roman governor Pilate, just after Christ’s crucifixion and requested that the tomb in which Christ was laid, should be made secure. The reason they gave was they were concerned that the disciples of Christ would steal his body away and claim his resurrection to be a fact. Was that the real reason – or was that a cover for their concerns at having made a big error and a futile attempt to prevent the resurrection? That can only be a matter of conjecture today. However, there are those in our times that would try to persuade us that Christ only swooned on the cross and then revived in the tomb. Hence (the argument goes) it was not a real resurrection. Promoters of that theory miss a number of points:

1. Christ was certified dead on the cross by Roman soldiers who were practised in that form of execution; they were so sure they did not bother to break his legs to finish him off. (breaking the legs prevented the victim from supporting their body weight resulting in suffocation.)
2. It is not possible to swoon and revive sufficiently just to walk away from a crucifixion and persuade those around that the body is completely healthy. Crucifixion puts a great physical stress on the human frame. Additionally, in the case of Jesus, there would be the loss of blood from the spear wound in his side.
3. Are we seriously expected to believe that the crucified and supposedly revived Christ was strong enough to roll back the

sealed stone covering the entrance to his tomb and then single-handed to overcome the Roman soldiers guarding it?

Christ made it quite plain what was going to happen to him prior to the awful torment of crucifixion that he went through:

'And it came to pass, as he was alone praying, his disciples were with him: and he asked them, saying, Whom say the people that I am? They answering said, John the Baptist; but some say, Elias; and others say, that one of the old prophets is risen again. He said unto them, But whom say ye that I am? Peter answering said, The Christ of God. And he straitly charged them, and commanded them to tell no man that thing; Saying, The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day.' [Luke 9.18-22]

Christ was very sure he was going to die and that he would be physically raised again the third day. Logically (if we follow the erroneous teaching), knowing that he was to be crucified (from the words of the prophets) Christ would have had to be extremely confident in his recuperative powers to be able to confidently predict that he **would** revive and that it would be on the third day after his death!

No, it stands to reason that the Scripture is the only source of accurate information concerning the reality of Christ's resurrection. Christ's confidence in his prediction was as a result of his knowledge that God would fulfil His word of prophecy. He had that lively hope in his mind, which enabled him to go through those terrible things as we have seen.

We too can share that same lively hope for our salvation through belief in the real resurrection, through baptism into the saving name of Jesus Christ and by looking forward to the time of his return to the earth to establish God's kingdom.

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From our Mail Bag

TITHING

EARLIER THIS YEAR we received a letter from a reader in Accra, Ghana, who asked: 'My question is about paying tithes. (see Malachi 3.10) Is there a corresponding reference in the New Testament and what did Jesus say about tithing?'

The first occurrence of tithing appears to be when Abraham met Melchizedec as recorded in the book of Genesis:

'And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And **he gave him tithes of all.**' [*Genesis 14.18-20*]

This is commented on by the writer to the Hebrews, who confirms that the proportion was 10%:

'For this Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; To whom also Abraham gave a **tenth** part of all...' [*Hebrews 7.1,2*]

The Law made it quite clear that tithes were required, as can be seen in a number of references, for example:

'Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year.' [*Deuteronomy 14.22*]

‘Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house...’ [Malachi 3.10]

Jesus made it quite clear that he had come to fulfil the Law of Moses and put in its place a far better order. [Matthew 5 v 17] This was shown at the death of Jesus when the veil of the Temple was torn in a miraculous way which signified a new way of approach to God. (compare Matthew 27.51 with Hebrews 10.19-23)

Paul’s letter to the Galatians also confirms this:

‘But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.’ [Galatians 3.23-26]

The New Testament teaching shows that tithing was no longer essential, it was left to the individual, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

‘Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let **every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him**, that there be no gatherings when I come.’ [1 Corinthians 16.1,2]

On a similar point (concerning circumcision), Paul argues that if you insist on keeping **any** aspect of the law to achieve salvation, then you need to uphold the **whole** law:

‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. **Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.**’

[Galatians 5.1-3 NIV]

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Birds of the Bible

The Dove

THE DOVE IS the second bird named in the Bible. After the raven had been sent out of the Ark by Noah, the dove was dispatched on three separate occasions. [Genesis 8.8-12] The Hebrew word **yohnah** is thought to derive from the word **anah**, meaning 'mourn' and evidently is an imitation of the mournful cooing sound made by the dove. The voice of the dove is particularly tender and plaintive and bears a striking resemblance to the cry of a person in distress, to which the inspired writers of Scripture alluded. [Isaiah 38.14; 59.11; Ezekiel 7.16; Nahum 2.7] The dove has a soft, gentle appearance and disposition, earning for itself the description 'the sheep of the bird world'. The name Jonah (derived from **yohnah**) was and is a popular name for Jewish boys, [Jonah 1.1] so we learn from Scripture that Jonah means 'dove'.

While 'dove' and 'pigeon' are often used interchangeably in English, both birds being of the family Columbidae, the term 'dove' is more usually applied to the smaller varieties living wild, that regularly migrate. Because in English there is a lack of distinction between the dove and the pigeon, translators usually render **yohnah** as 'dove', except when it occurs in association with 'turtledove' (as in all cases relating to sacrifices); in

these texts it is usually translated 'pigeon'. The most common varieties of doves to be found in Israel are the **rock dove** (*Columba Pulumbus*), which is also called the wood pigeon and the **stock dove** (*Columba Oenas*). Ring doves are found particularly in the forests of Gilead and Carmel. The stock dove breed on the coastlands, along the gorges of the Jordan Valley and the highlands to the West.

Stock Dove



Doves characteristically have a plump, full-breasted body, a graceful neck, a small rounded head, a rather slender bill and short legs. The feathers are very compact, giving the bird a rather sleek look. It is universally agreed to be one

of the most beautiful objects in nature. The brilliancy of her plumage, the splendour of her eye, the innocence of her look, the excellence of her disposition and the purity of her habits have been a theme of admiration and praise in every age. The Psalmist alludes to the snowy whiteness of her wings and the rich golden hues that adorn her neck. [*Psalm 68.13*] Doves are frequently of a blue-grey colour, while some have an iridescent sheen on parts of the plumage, causing it to take on a metallic appearance in the golden sunlight.

Doves are notable for both their devotion to their mates and their affection. In courtship they bring their heads together and each bird takes the other's beak in its own, much like lovers kissing. 'My dove' is an apt term of endearment. [*Song of Songs 5.2; 6.9*] The Shulamite maiden's eyes are aptly likened to the soft gentle eyes of a dove, [*Song of Songs 1.15; 4.1*] while she refers to her lover's eyes as blue-grey doves bathing in pools of milk. This lovely simile evidently represents the darker iris surrounded by the gleaming white of the eyes, set like a jewel in the foil of a ring. [*Song of Songs 5.12*]



Ring or Collared
Dove

The dove is particularly defenceless and timid and it trembles visibly when frightened. [*Hosea 11.11*] In its wild state the dove nests in valleys, [*Ezekiel 7.16*] while the rock dove makes its nest on ledges and holes in cliffs and rocky gorges. [*Song of Songs 2.14; Jeremiah 48.28*] Domesticated doves fly back to the dovecotes prepared for them, the white underside of the wings of a large flock of doves giving the appearance of a moving cloud. [*Isaiah 60.8*] Dovecotes, some of considerable size, have been excavated in Israel, attesting to their use in ancient times.

Although the dove is a gentle creature, it is also a powerful flier; its strong wings enable it to fly long distances in search of food and swiftly enough to elude most of its enemies. [*Psalm 55.6-8*] (figuratively used here for King David's escape from Absalom and his rebellious party). In spite of this, doves are quite trusting of humans and are rather easily trapped or caught in a net. Thus the rebellious northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim), foolishly placing their confidence first in Egypt and then in Assyria, instead of turning to Yahweh for forgiveness and help, was likened to a 'simple minded dove' due to be caught in a net. [*Hosea 7.11,12*] In a well known passage of Scripture Jesus warned against the wolf-like opposers that his sheep-like disciples would

encounter and counselled them to be not only 'innocent as doves' but also 'wise as serpents.' This wisdom of Jesus is just as applicable to his disciples today who preach the Gospel of the kingdom of God. [*Matthew 10.16 RSV*]

At the time of Jesus' baptism and subsequent anointing by God's Holy Spirit, that Holy Spirit was caused by God to appear '*in a bodily shape like a dove,*' its visible descent upon Jesus perhaps being similar to the fluttering descent of a dove as it approaches its perch. [*Luke 3.22; Matthew 3.16; Mark 1.10; John 1.32-34*]

Doves have long been used for sacrificial purposes, as is indicated by their being sold by those pursuing commercial activities at the temple in Jerusalem. However the term 'doves' may here indicate the turtledoves or young pigeons mentioned in the Mosaic law and as previously offered by Abram. [*Genesis 15.9; Leviticus 12.6; 14.22; Mark 11.15; John 2.14-16*]

In conclusion, it is notable that the dove's gentle manners are as engaging as her form. This beautiful bird is also a fitting advocate of cleanliness, it is an avid bather and keeps its plumage elegant and rich in appearance. This remarkable little bird is truly a fitting emblem of simplicity, purity, gentleness, chastity and loving, loyal affection. Therefore, disciples of Jesus Christ would do well to earnestly seek these Divinely given qualities and together with the dove, bear witness to the glory of our Creator.

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There are other passages which indicate that there is freedom in this aspect of giving:

'But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.' [*2 Corinthians 9.6-7*]

Paul in his letter to the Romans shows that we are to present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. [*Romans 12.1*] Of course the epitome of giving is seen in the way Jesus willingly gave his life for his friends.

Correspondence Editor